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Media Use Habits, Negative Encounters with the Police, and Perceptions of the Police: The Mainstreaming Hypothesis Versus the Resonance Hypothesis

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Abstract

Media researchers have long considered the extent to which the media influence perceptions of the police. More recently, scholars have encouraged more specific investigations to determine if media effects can vary depending on the audience's characteristics. The present article contributes to and extends this line of research by employing unique measures of the media considering various modes of media and content and by examining whether individual experiences condition media effects on perceptions of the police. Using a sample of college students from Southwestern Pennsylvania, results show that there are significant interaction effects between some media measures and audience characteristics, highlighting that it is critical to consider individual characteristics and experiences in understanding media effects on perceptions of the police. Our findings provide mixed support for both of the mainstreaming hypothesis and the resonance hypothesis.

Keywords: media, perceptions of police, cultivation theory, mainstreaming hypothesis

Introduction

The quality of the relationship between the public and the police is a key criminal justice policy issue because perceptions of police have been linked to a number of outcomes such as an individual's cooperation with and consent to the decisions made by police officers (see President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015; Tyler, Goff, & MacCoun, 2015). Additionally, individuals with positive perceptions of police are less likely to openly defy the police and to react aggressively toward the police (Tyler & Huo, 2002). More importantly, positive perceptions of the police can bring about long-term benefits by promoting citizens to be self-regulating and law-abiding not just during an actual encounter with the police but also when they are not interacting with the police (Mazerolle, Bennett, Davis, Sargeant, & Manning, 2013). As summarized by Skogan (2006), positive perceptions of the police can make "their work easier and more effective" (p. 118).

Researchers have long been interested in factors predicting positive perceptions of the police (e.g., Brown & Benedict, 2002; Donner, Maskaly, Fridell, & Jennings, 2015; Worden & McLean, 2017). There is an emerging body of evidence concerning how the media influence individuals' perceptions of the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Choi, 2020; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Graziano, 2018). Understanding the role of the media in perceptions of the police is among one of the most important aspects of all policing investigations. This is critical because the majority of citizens do not frequently interact with the police (Durose, Smith, & Langan, 2007; Eith & Durose, 2011), and many of them tend to obtain information about the police from the media (Surette, 2015). With the advent of social media and the third and fourth screen devices (e.g., mobile phones and tablets), people have near-constant access to media (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos,

2011; Twenge, 2017). While some theorists have advanced a hypothesis that media consumption cultivates consumers' misperceptions, the impact of the media on perceptions of the police remains unclear (Choi, 2018; Graziano, 2018).

Accordingly, the present study aims to build upon limitations of prior research by undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the extent to which different media channels influence perceptions of the police. The review of the literature presented below identifies the two hypotheses related to the relationship between media consumption and public perceptions. The current study addresses the limitations that can stem from measuring overall exposure to the media by examining the effects of distinct sources of media exposure. Finally, this study explores the differential effects of media consumption on perceptions of the police depending on individual characteristics. The findings are considered within the context of Gerbner's mainstreaming and resonance hypothesis.

Literature Review

Cultivation Theory and its Theoretical Development

Gerbner's cultivation theory posits that greater exposure to the media can cultivate the likelihood that audience members will develop the view that mirrors media accounts of the world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Early research highlighted the overemphasis of the media on crime. Actual crime incidence is exaggerated through the media because a substantial portion of media coverage is comprised of crime issues, and serious crime is overrepresented (Kappeler & Potter, 2017; Robinson, 2016). When the local news portrays local crime as sensational and emphasizes the severity of the crime, local media consumers are more likely to be exposed to media messages indicating that their community is problem-filled and dangerous (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1977). More recent empirical investigations have documented the media

effects on perceptions of crime and neighborhood conditions that lead to a confirmation of the cultivation hypothesis (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2014).

Although cultivation theory has been widely examined, Gerbner's subsequent theoretical elaboration involving audience characteristics have received relatively little attention (Eschholz, 1997). The resonance hypothesis proposes that media effects can be stronger for those individuals with relevant personal experiences and characteristics. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980) argued that when people see information from the media that is consistent with their own experiences, "the combination may result in a coherent and powerful 'double dose' of the television message and significantly boost cultivation" (p. 15). Research on the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime has shown that the media can more influence victims and those who live in high-crime areas than non-victims and residents of low-crime areas (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004).

The mainstreaming hypothesis, proposed by Gerbner et al. (1980) and related to the cultivation hypothesis, suggests that the media can encourage the development of a common worldview among different audience members (Shrum & Bischak, 2001). As stated by Gerbner et al. (1980), "differences deriving from other factors and social forces may be diminished or even absent among heavy viewers" (p. 15). In other words, people with different experiences and characteristics come to share similar views toward the police as they consume media more frequently. Using data from the General Social Survey, Gerbner et al. (1980) found that light viewers with middle and upper incomes were significantly less likely to report a high expectation of encountering violence compared to light viewers with low incomes, but this difference between the low-income group and the other two groups disappeared among heavy viewers.

They used this empirical evidence to support the conclusion that the media contribute to the cultivation of common views among heavy viewers. Assessing the validity of the mainstreaming hypothesis concerning perceptions of the police is virtually non-existent and deserving of empirical scrutiny, especially given that most studies have demonstrated the importance of personal experience and characteristics in predicting perceptions of the police.

Previous Research on Exposure to Media and Attitudes Toward Police

A recent line of theoretical and empirical research has begun to specify and explore individual characteristics under which media consumption relates to perceptions of the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Choi, 2019; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Intravia, Wolff, & Piquero, 2018; Roche, Pickett, & Gertz, 2016), including the extent to which different forms of the media affect individuals' sentiments toward the police. However, findings are inconsistent. Some studies have found a positive association between media consumption and perceptions of police, and research shows some consistency with this association regardless of viewers' exposure to fictionalized dramas or news programming. For example, Eschholz and colleagues (2002) found that heavy viewers of television news have more confidence in the police than their counterparts. Drawing on data from a sample of 4,245 California residents, Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) found that confidence in the police was positively related not only to watching television news programming but also to crime-based reality television shows. In a recent study, Donovan and Klahm (2015) found evidence that individuals who watch crime drama-related television show significantly increased confidence in the police, positive perceptions of the excessive use of force by police, and positive perceptions of police misconduct.

In contrast, some studies showed that media consumption is negatively related to the view of the police. Weitzer and Tuch (2004) found that individuals who were more exposed to reports on police misconduct (on the radio, television, or in the newspaper) were more likely to have negative perceptions of police misconduct. Employing data from the 2000 Law and Media Survey, Dowler and Zawilski (2007) also examined whether exposure to entertainment media (including crime drama shows, crime investigation shows, and police reality shows), as well as the traditional media format, affected perceptions of police misconduct and police discrimination. In the analysis of a nationally representative sample of adults, network news viewers were inclined to believe that police misconduct is common. Further, individuals who frequently watched crime-solving shows were more likely to believe that police treatment is unfair. Most recently, Intravia et al. (2018) relied on data from a sample of 245 undergraduate students and found that frequent consumption of online news has a negative impact on the judgment of police legitimacy (Intravia et al., 2018).

Yet, some studies on media effects indicated that the media has little effect on perceptions of police. Dowler (2002) used data from the 1995 National Opinion Survey of Crime and Justice and investigated whether media consumption (i.e., crime news and entertainment shows) influenced perceived police effectiveness. His study yielded the finding that none of the media measures had a significant impact on perceptions of the police. Chermak, McGarrell, and Gruenewald (2006) also examined how celebrated crime cases influenced individuals' attitudes towards the police by taking into account various contextual variables. They used three waves of survey data collected from the Indianapolis Directed Patrol Project (IDPP) and found that the consumption of news on police misconduct through television and newspapers had no relationship with any perceptions of police, including general attitudes toward police, police

harassment and perceptions of police service. Roche and colleagues (2016) examined the influence of traditional media (local and national television news), entertainment media (television crime programs), and the internet (consumption of internet news) and found that no forms of the media influenced individuals' attitudes towards the expanding of police powers.

The findings are mixed due to inconsistent measures used in this line of research. Researchers have used different media measures; some studies have used whether individuals are exposed to high-profile cases involving the police to examine the impact of the media (Chermak et al., 2006; Kochel, 2017; Lasley, 1994); other research has measured the media by asking individuals if they are aware of negative news coverage of the police (e.g., police misconduct) (Miller & Davis, 2008; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004; Wu, Sun, & Smith, 2011). Some scholars employed measurements that focused on individuals' media consumption. Media consumption measurement often consists of asking individuals how much they use the media (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Gauthier & Graziano, 2018; Intravia et al., 2018). Although there has been some work undertaken on the relationship between different media channels (e.g., the Internet or newspaper) and individuals' perceptions about social reality, much less research has been conducted to investigate the impact of the specific content of each media source on consumers' attitudes and perceptions toward crime and justice (cf. Intravia et al., 2018; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). This measurement-related issue may explain some of the inconsistent findings discussed above.

Despite unresolved issues involving the measure of media consumption, several reviews of the extant research on correlates of perceptions of the police (Brown & Benedict, 2002), or the relationship between the media and perceptions of the police (Graziano, 2018), have suggested that the media may play a critical role in the development of perceptions of the police. In

addition to problematic measures of the media, two important limitations of the existing research warrant further investigation: our limited understanding of how the media influence individuals with different characteristics, and the lack of a guiding theoretical framework.

The first methodological limitation is centered on the audiences' characteristics when understanding the impact of the media (Eschholz, 1997). While theoretical scholarship on media effects has highlighted the importance of considering individuals' experiences and their characteristics in relation to the impact of the media on perceptions of the police, many studies have failed to examine a wide range of individual characteristics that may be relevant to understand perceptions of the police. For instance, while some researchers considered race and gender as important moderators of a media effect (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Eschholz et al., 2002), the majority of the literature has not considered the interactive elements involving individuals' negative experiences with the police or their victimization experiences.

The second theoretical limitation has been a lack of a guiding theory to inform much of the knowledge base on interactions between the audience and media in predicting perceptions of the police. Although some researchers relied on Gerbner's cultivation theory to connect the media to audience perceptions of the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2003; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Gauthier & Graziano, 2018), Gerbner's later elaboration of the mainstreaming hypothesis and the resonance hypothesis has been rarely discussed to account for audience effects (Gerbner et al., 1980). While Gerbner's cultivation theory has guided much research, the importance of these elaborations has not been completely explored.

Current Study

The current study seeks to overcome these limitations by examining the extent to which audience characteristics condition the relationship between various media channels and

perceptions of the police while considering the content of what individuals take in. Importantly, the findings are discussed within the framework of Gerbner's cultivation theory, the mainstreaming and resonance hypotheses. Specifically, the current study seeks to address two research questions:

Research Question 1: Do measures of the various channels of the media influence perceptions of the police?

Research Question 2: Do individual characteristics interact with the impact of media consumption in predicting perceptions of the police?

Data and Methods

Data

The sample for the current study was derived from students at a public state university in Southwestern Pennsylvania in the United States. While the surrounding environment of the school is rural, the students who enroll in the school are from different parts of the U.S., and outside the U.S. There were 9,215 undergraduate students in 2018. Considering all of the variables available for the present research, Cohen's (1988) power analysis suggested that the minimum sample size should be at least 337 participants to achieve the customary power of .80 (with all 17 variables available) and a medium effect size of .09. It should be noted that more variables were measured than considered for use in this analysis. Due to potential issues involving the possibility of low response rates and missing values, the adequate target sample size was adjusted to be 800.

The data were collected using disproportionate stratification, including larger samples of students from the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Classes were randomly selected from a list of courses available for the spring semester of 2018. Available Criminology

and Criminal Justice (CJ) courses and non-CJ courses were separately used to achieve disproportionate sample sizes for CJ majors and non-CJ majors¹. The undergraduate courses that were not being held on the main university campus or online courses were excluded from the sampling frame. Initially, 15 classes were randomly chosen from each sampling frame for CJ majors and non-CJ majors. Emails were sent to the instructors of these courses through the university's email system, explaining the purpose of the study and the amount of time that it was expected to take to complete the survey. When permission to administer the survey during class was obtained, times were scheduled for a class visit. Many instructors did not provide permission to implement the survey because they could not spare time from their teaching. When there was no permission granted, random selections of classes followed until the targeted sample was achieved. As a result, emails were sent to the instructors of 128 classes (i.e., 92 non-CJ major classes and 36 CJ major classes).

The survey was administered in the classrooms, but instead of a traditional paper survey, a shortened link for an electronic *Qualtrics* survey was provided. Students used their own internet-connected devices (e.g., smartphones, laptops, or tablets) to access the informed consent instructions and the online survey. For students who did not want to take part in the survey or those who were under 18, an alternative internet link was posted to allow students to anonymously opt in or out of the survey administration.

A total of 778 surveys were collected. Many of these surveys were not included because several respondents opted out of the survey after initially starting it. Also, some students did not respond to many questions, which made it hard to use their responses. After removing those who opted out and those who had extensive missing values (> 60%), the current study used a sample of 699 individuals remained for analysis. Although our sample size is smaller than our original

target sample size, the response rate was higher than we had expected (94.34%), and the missing values were also not as extensive as we were concerned. Thus, our sample size significantly exceeded the minimum sample size ($n = 337$) mentioned above to estimate media effects on perceptions of the police.

Measures

Questions about the general media use habits of the respondents (e.g., the Internet or newspaper), the amount of time watching TV, previous victimization experiences, and perceptions of the police were developed based on the review of the existing literature on the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of crime and justice (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). One notable feature of the survey was that it used visual analog scales (VAS). VAS is a psychometric scale that allows survey participants to choose the response on a continuous line between two ends. Recent studies by methodologists have shown that VAS is useful in enhancing the accuracy of responses and engaging respondents in the survey (Sikkel, Steenbergen, & Gras, 2014). Respondents could specify a seven-point VAS with two decimal points.

Confidence in the police and police legitimacy. Prior research has shown that confidence in the police is conceptually different from police legitimacy (Cao, 2015; Jackson & Gau, 2016). While confidence in the police stresses positive expectations of the public about the police, legitimacy is often conceptualized with one distinct element: obligation to obey (Tyler & Huo, 2002). While there is no agreement on how these concepts can be best defined, most researchers tend to agree that police legitimacy underlines the differential power structure and its rightfulness (Jackson et al., 2011; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1990). Confidence in the

police is believed to stress whether the police will perform their roles in a way consistent with the societal norms associated with their roles (Hawdon, 2008; Jackson et al., 2011; Tyler, 1990).

Reflecting on the discussions about conceptual differences between confidence in the police and police legitimacy (Gau, 2011; Reisig, Bratton, & Gertz, 2007), two measures were independently employed. Confidence in the police was assessed by asking respondents, “(1) ‘People’s basic rights are well-protected by police officers in my community,’ (2) ‘Police officers can be trusted to make decisions that are right for my community,’ (3) ‘Most police officers in my community do their jobs well,’ and (4) ‘Police officers in my community are generally honest’” with a seven-point VAS options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The responses to these four items were summed to represent that a higher score indicated a higher level of confidence in the police (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$, mean inter-item $r = .81$). All four items loaded on only one factor.

Perceived police legitimacy was measured with three items derived and adapted from previous studies (Gau, 2011; Reisig et al., 2007; Tyler & Huo, 2002). The following three items were used: (1) “People should accept police officers’ decisions even if they think that the police are wrong,” (2) “When the police issue a formal order, people should do what the police say even if they disagree with it,” and (3) “Generally speaking, people should do what the police tell them to do.” These items were coded so that higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived police legitimacy. The magnitude of the reliability of perceived police legitimacy was above the acceptable range, and three items loaded on one overall factor (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$, mean inter-item $r = .61$).

Media variables. In the current study, six media-related independent variables were used to examine the relationship between media and perceptions of the police. Scholars have

employed diverse measures of the media to investigate the role of the media in shaping perceptions of the police: overall media consumption, media consumption of specific media channels or particular media content, high-profile incidents, or negative awareness (Choi, 2018; Graziano, 2018). Drawing on the work of Nabi and Sullivan (2001), the first variable measured the respondents' number of hours that they spent watching television. To minimize the potential issues associated with retrospective items, respondents were provided with specific reference points for time. They were asked to specify the average amount of hours spent watching television on the average weekday, Saturday, and Sunday, respectively. The composite scale of television consumption was created by weighting the number of hours watching television on the average weekday by five and by then summing those hours with the amount of television watching on Saturday and Sunday.

The other measures of media use habits were derived and adapted from Weitzer and Kubrin (2004). One serious limitation of the measures used in previous studies was the failure to consider the specific content of the media; however, Weitzer and Kubrin developed media measures that could consider the different channels and specific content of the media. Interestingly, even though Weitzer and Kubrin acknowledged that the media should be disaggregated into subtypes after checking the distribution of the different types of media, they did not include the subtypes of media in their statistical analysis. Gauthier and Graziano (2018) also employed Weitzer and Kubrin's media measurements and used a composite scale of different types of media instead of distinguishing each type of media separately. Our study attends to this issue by measuring each type of media individually.

To examine whether the habit of various types of media consumption is associated with perceptions of the police, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed

with the following statements: (1) “I often watch national evening news programs such as World News with David Muir or cable news programs like CNN,” (2) “I often watch local television news for information other than weather and sports,” (3) “I often read the news or editorial sections of a daily newspaper,” (4) “I often listen to radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues, and politics,” (5) “I often go online to get information on current events, public issues, and politics.” The responses to these items were measured with 7-point VAS options ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree).

Individual characteristics and experiences. Sex, race, Hispanic, CJ major, victimization experience, and negative encounter with the police were entered into the statistical models to control for the effects of individual characteristics. Differential reception thesis posits that the media can differently influence individuals (Chiricos et al., 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). If individual characteristics were found to be significantly associated with perceptions of the police, it was also examined if these variables conditioned the relationship between the media variables and perceptions of the police (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Intravia et al., 2018). First, sex was measured with a single survey item and was included as a dummy variable (1 = male). For race, respondents were asked to choose their race among the following six categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Native American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Some other race. Race was transformed into a dichotomous variable (0 = nonwhite, 1 = white). Major was measured with a single survey item and coded “1” for CJ majors and “0” for non-CJ majors.

Previous victimization was measured with eight survey items asking respondents whether they had experienced the following incidences in the past year: (1) “having my money or my property stolen (e.g., pick-pocketing),” (2) “getting robbed (threat by force or threat of force),”

(3) “being beaten or hurt,” (4) “being scammed,” (5) “being sexually harassed,” (6) “having my property damaged,” (7) “someone broke into my house,” and (8) “someone followed and picked on me persistently.” The responses to these items were transformed into a dichotomous variable of victim and non-victim. Negative contact with police was assessed with three survey items that asked respondents whether they had experienced an unreasonable stop, insulting language, or physical force during the previous year. If they had experienced any negative encounter with the police, they were coded as 1, and the others were coded as 0.

Analytic Strategy

The analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, we presented descriptive statistics on the respondents’ media use habits and individual characteristics (see Table 1). Second, ordinary least squares (OLS) models were estimated to examine how the media variables were related to perceptions of the police, and they were used to assess the main effects that individual characteristics had on perceptions of the police. Although our media measures are based on a single item, previous studies suggest that VAS score should be considered to be continuous data (Flynn, Van Schaik, & Van Wersch, 2004). Additionally, our preliminary analysis did not detect any signification problems that involve the violation of the important assumptions of multiple linear regression, justifying our use of OLS models (see below). In the final stage, the interactions between the media variables and individual characteristics in predicting perceptions of the police were examined.

The normal Q-Q Plot of the standardized residuals demonstrated that there were no major deviations from normality. Since one of our reviewers expressed the concern regarding non-linearities between media variables and perceptions of the police, we examined component-plus-residual plots by using “cprplot” commands in STATA 16. Our plots indicated that the media

variables have a linear relationship to both confidence in the police and police legitimacy. A standardized residuals scatterplot showed that the residuals produced in the statistical models were homoscedastic. Additionally, bivariate correlations and variance inflation factors were checked to ensure that multicollinearity issues were not present when performing the analysis.

Results

As a first step in the analysis, the bivariate correlations between perceptions of the police and media variables were assessed. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients are displayed in Table 2. While the two dependent variables, police legitimacy and confidence in the police, were highly correlated, the correlation coefficient did not exceed .70, which suggests the discriminant validity of these two variables (DeVellis, 2012). As was predicted, the media variables were not highly correlated to each other; this questioned the validity of creating the composite scale with different media use habits. Notably, most media measures were positively correlated with perceptions of the police, while total TV consumption was negatively associated with only confidence in the police. Other significant preliminary findings also emerged. Nonwhites tended to have negative perceptions of the police, and race was the strongest correlate with both confidence in the police and perceptions of the police. Hispanics exhibited lower confidence in the police and police legitimacy compared with their counterparts.

Interestingly, CJ majors are more likely to have more positive perceptions of the police compared to their peers. A negative encounter with the police was the second strong correlate with perceptions of the police. The evidence suggests that perceptions of the police were significantly lower among those who had a negative encounter with the police than their counterparts.

[Table 2 about here]

The multivariate results from OLS regression models are presented in Table 3. Model 1 in Table 3 only examined the relationship between media variables and confidence in the police. Two media variables were significantly associated with confidence in the police. Total TV consumption was negatively and significantly related to confidence in the police, but local TV use habit was positively associated with confidence in the police. However, in Model 2, total TV consumption was no longer associated with confidence in the police once individual characteristics were controlled for.

Similarly, the positive relationship between local TV news consumption and confidence in the police was marginally significant, net of the control variables. Five of the variables of individual characteristics had significant associations with confidence in the police in model 2. Male respondents were more likely to express confidence in the police compared with female respondents, and CJ majors exhibited more confidence in the police as opposed to non-CJ majors. By contrast, nonwhite respondents, those who had a victimization experience, and those who had a negative encounter with the police in the past year were less likely to trust the police.

[Table 3 about here]

Since it is possible to find significant interaction effects even when the main effects are not significant, we conducted a series of moderation analyses (Hayes, 2013). Thirty-six interaction terms between six media measures and six individual characteristics were created and examined individually in our analysis. Table 4 presents slope coefficients, standard errors, and model improvement (ΔR^2) statistics involving significant interaction effects. Two of the 36 interaction terms yielded a better than chance improvement in fit. Specifically, the respondent's race conditioned the impact of newspaper on confidence in the police and being Hispanic also interacted with the effect of newspaper in predicting confidence in the police. The positive

effects of newspaper on confidence in the police was stronger among nonwhites and Hispanics.

Figure 1 displays an example interaction plot between race and newspaper predicting confidence in the police.

[Table 4 about here]

[Figure 1 about here]

Next, the relationship between media measures and perceived police legitimacy was investigated. Model 1 in Table 5 shows that the pattern of the relationships between media variables and police legitimacy is somewhat different from the results from the OLS regression, which predicted the variance in confidence in the police. Internet use was positively and significantly associated with police legitimacy. Even after holding individual characteristics constant, internet use remained statistically significant. As with the models predicting confidence in the police, individual characteristics accounted for more variance of police legitimacy. However, not all variables that were found to be significant were predictive of police legitimacy. Three of the control variables were significantly related to police legitimacy. Nonwhite respondents were less likely to exhibit positive police legitimacy in comparison to their white counterparts. Respondents' major was a significant predictor of police legitimacy. CJ majors were more likely to express stronger police legitimacy. Previous negative encounters with the police were negatively and significantly associated with perceived police legitimacy.

[Table 5 about here]

Table 6 presents the findings of interaction terms for media measures and audience characteristics in predicting police legitimacy. We tested the 36 interaction terms between six media measures and six audience characteristics that were used in moderation analysis for confidence in the police. Our findings indicated that there were five significant interaction terms.

Specifically, sex conditioned the effects of national TV consumption and newspaper reading to predict police legitimacy. Hispanics were more influenced by newspaper reading, and a negative encounter with the police moderated the relationship between internet use and police legitimacy. Finally, victims were also more influenced by Internet consumption compared to nonvictims. Figure 2 presents an example interaction plot between national TV and sex. National TV consumption was associated with increases in police legitimacy, but more so for male students than female students.

[Table 6 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Discussion

George Gerbner, who was a pioneer researcher into the impact of the media on viewers' perceptions of the world, argued that the frequent exposure to the media can result in a "heightened sense of risk and insecurity," which could then lead people to be "more likely to increase acquiescence to and dependence upon established authority, and to legitimize its use of force (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 194). The proposed role of the media in shaping perceptions of the police has led researchers to pay considerable attention to the linkage between the media and perceptions of the police. One important limitation of the previous literature on the linkage between the media and perceptions of the police, however, is that the vast majority of studies failed to specify the type of media used to obtain information and news content (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dirikx, Gelders, & Van den Bulck, 2013; Dowler, 2002; Eschholz et al., 2002).

Additionally, while most studies on the impact of the media on perceptions of the police draw on Gerbner's cultivation theory (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Choi, 2020; Dowler,

2003; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Gauthier & Graziano, 2018; Roche et al., 2016), some important insights from Gerbner were overlooked (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). For example, Gerbner argued that there are two different possible patterns of audience effects: the mainstreaming hypothesis and resonance hypothesis. While some researchers have examined interaction effects between the media and audience characteristics in predicting perceptions of the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Choi, 2019; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Intravia et al., 2018), the discussions of their findings did not fully reflect Gerbner and colleagues' theoretical development of the cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gerbner et al., 2002). Accordingly, the current study addressed these issues and improved upon some limitations in the existing research that had considered the conditioning effects of audience characteristics.

Specifically, the current study used data from students at a public state university in Southwestern Pennsylvania to examine to the extent to which the media influenced perceptions of the police and how audience characteristics conditioned the media effects. Overall, results regarding the media effects were consistent with a few of the previous studies that supported the positive relationship between the media and perceptions of the police (e.g., Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Eschholz et al., 2002). However, the results contradicted some of the others, which report a negative relationship between media consumption and perceptions of the police (e.g., Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Intravia et al., 2018). The significant relationships between media consumption and perceptions of the police present evidence in favor of Gerbner's cultivation theory (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan et al., 2014). That said, findings showed that once individual characteristics were controlled for in the

multivariate analysis, the overall TV consumption and the majority of media variables were not significantly related to confidence in the police and police legitimacy.

Nonetheless, Internet use was positively related to the level of perceived police legitimacy. Our findings involving the effect of Internet use are different from Intravia et al. (2018) and Roche et al. (2016), who found either a negative relationship between Internet news and policing attitudes or null effects of Internet news. For instance, Intravia et al. (2018) tried to estimate the amount of time spent reading the online news and its relationship with attitudes toward police legitimacy without considering the specific content that respondents read. The current study, specifying the content of internet use, yielded the finding that those who used the Internet frequently were more likely to exhibit a higher level of police legitimacy compared with their counterparts. We measured Internet use with the statement, “I often go online to get information on current events, public issues, and politics.” As Gerbner and Gross (1976) noted, those who frequently obtain information online may have developed a “heightened sense of risk and insecurity,” which, in turn, led them to count on the established authority, the police.

One of the key contributions of the present article was its application of Gerbner’s elaboration of the mainstreaming hypothesis and resonance hypothesis to interpret the interrelationships between audience characteristics and media use, and then how they combine to relate to perceptions of the police. The key moderation analysis showed that two interaction terms were significant in predicting confidence in the police, and five interaction terms were significant in predicting police legitimacy. Our results involving interaction effects provide mixed support for both of the mainstreaming hypothesis and the resonance hypothesis. Some findings can be interpreted as evidence in favor of the mainstreaming hypothesis (Gerbner et al., 1980; Shrum & Bischak, 2001). The mainstreaming hypothesis holds that the media can shape

common perspectives among viewers. For example, even though there was a big difference in the level of confidence in the police between whites and nonwhites who do not often read newspapers, this difference was significantly reduced between whites and nonwhites who read newspapers frequently.

On the contrary, sex conditioned the effect of national TV consumption. Specifically, even though male students who did not watch national TV frequently reported higher levels of police legitimacy compared to female peers, national TV consumption made this gap bigger, suggesting that male students' positive perceptions were reinforced by national TV consumption. This finding is in line with the resonance hypothesis, positing that individuals' perceptions can be more intensified by the messages from TV consistent with their perceptions (Gerbner et al., 1980; Shrum & Bischak, 2001). It should be noted that there was also a pattern of the findings that do not fit either the mainstreaming hypothesis or the resonance hypothesis. For example, one of our moderation analyses indicated that internet use had a stronger relationship to police legitimacy among those who had experienced negative contact with the police than those who had not. Interestingly, the gap in views among high Internet consumers was larger than the initial gap was for low Internet consumers.

The results presented here tend to support the notions that the media can shape perceptions of the police and that media effects can differ depending on individual experiences, at least among this sample of students. While this pattern of results is congruent with Gerbner's cultivation theory, given that many media measures were not significantly related to perceptions of the police after controlling for individual characteristics, the role that the media play in forming perceptions of the police should not be overstated.

The findings of this study complement recent research examining the relationship between media consumption, audience characteristics, and perceptions of the police by showing that those individuals with a negative experience with the police can be influenced more by media use compared to those who did not have a negative encounter with the police. Notably, the results emerged using the measures that capture various modes of the media considering specific media content. Previous measures tend to restrict the scope of the media to traditional mediums such as television, newspaper, or radio. Recognizing the importance of emerging mediums, the present study examined the influence of different mediums such as the internet on our perceptions of the police (see also, Intravia et al., 2018; Roche et al., 2016).

Our study was limited in some respects. First, although the current study argues that the measures of the media used here can best reflect individuals' media consumption, considering that there is no consensus on how to measure the media, future studies can consider different types of the media and different media content other than the ones used in this paper. Recent years have seen a tremendous growth of new forms of media usage distinct from other traditional forms of mediums (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). For example, a variety of social media platforms emerged as important communication channels, and they have proliferated (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Smith & Anderson, 2018). The report from the Pew Research Center indicates that about 70% of Americans are using *Facebook* and *YouTube*. Also, many individuals began using *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, *Instagram*, *Reddit*, *Snapchat*, and many other platforms as pathways to obtain news and information (Shearer & Matsa, 2018).

Given that the social life of the average American has been restructured surrounding social media networks and that social media has become more addictive (Twenge, 2017), the importance of studying contemporary modes of media is evident. Though our study extends

previous studies by using the unique media measure that can capture various types of media usage, it may lack the content validity to reflect various dimensions of the media construct. Additionally, our findings showed that Internet use is important in understanding police legitimacy among students, but it may be helpful to consider what content they see on the Internet. Perhaps, more available images of body cam or cell phone footage may serve roles in shaping perceptions of the police among young generations². Future studies should continue to develop alternative measures that tap program characteristics as well as crime-related topics and assess media effects on attitudes toward the police based on the measures.

Second, data-related limitations should be noted. For example, considering that the current data are cross-sectional, a strong causal inference from this study should be qualified. Many researchers have noted the possibility that individuals with certain attitudes toward the police may have different media use habits (Dowler, 2002; Gauthier & Graziano, 2018). Accordingly, future studies should use longitudinal data to ensure the empirical direction of the relationships between the media and perceptions of the police. We also did not collect any data on the political orientation of the respondents, and it may be an important factor that we failed to include to better estimate media effects on perceptions of the police. Although few studies suggest that political ideology may not be a strong predictor of media use (Donovan & Klahm, 2015), we call for additional studies to include measures of political orientation so that the third variable problem can be avoided. Finally, given that the data were collected from young college students at one institution, it remains unclear if the relationships found in this study can be generalizable to samples from different settings. Further research can provide more conclusive answers regarding the external validity of the current findings.

Notwithstanding the limitations, this research reinforces the arguments that the role of audience characteristics should continue to be the subject of media research and that the measures of the media should be calibrated by considering the specific content and types of the media to build a more complete model of media effects (Graziano, 2018; Potter, 2014; Potter & Chang, 1990; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004).

Notes

1. The university where this sample was drawn limits registration within Criminology and Criminal Justice courses to students who have declared Criminology as their major course of study or have declared a related minor that is based upon a concentration of criminology and criminal justice courses. These enrollment limitations led to the decision to sample CJ and non-CJ courses differently.
2. The authors would like to thank and credit an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Percentage	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Range
<i>Dependent Variables</i>			
Police legitimacy		13.96 (4.04)	3–21
Confidence in the police		19.55 (5.65)	4–28
<i>Media Variables</i>			
Total TV consumption		34.25 (25.66)	0–183
National TV		2.49 (1.69)	1–7
Local TV		3.10 (1.82)	1–7
Newspaper		2.34 (1.54)	1–7
Radio		2.53 (1.71)	1–7
Internet		4.98 (1.83)	1–7
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>			
Sex (1 = male)	45.34%		4–16
Race (1 = nonwhite)	21.89%		5–20
Hispanic (1 = Hispanic)	6.28%		0–330
CJ Major (1 = CJ major)	51.31%		3–12
Victimization (1 = victim)	34.46%		0–6.43
Negative encounter with police (1 = yes)	22.45%		3–12

Note: *SD* = standard deviation.

Table 2. Correlation matrix for independent, control, and dependent variables.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
(1)	1													
(2)	.645*	1												
(3)	-.139*	-.058	1											
(4)	.053	.117*	-.031	1										
(5)	.096*	.103*	.043	.514*	1									
(6)	.079*	.109*	-.044	.410*	.388*	1								
(7)	.009	.054	-.013	.351*	.272*	.391*	1							
(8)	.091*	.138*	-.139*	.203*	.168*	.208*	.212*	1						
(9)	.123*	.100*	-.094*	.003	-.015	.068	.027	.112*	1					
(10)	-.437*	-.334*	.268*	.009	.017	.010	.080*	-.051	-.131*	1				
(11)	-.120*	-.105*	.076*	-.003	-.065	-.014	.017	-.035	-.114*	.167*	1			
(12)	.116*	.155*	.106*	.045	.128*	.030	.034	.071	.038	.013	-.013	1		
(13)	-.152*	-.074	.041	-.026	-.034	.019	-.005	.044	-.051	.003	.032	-.013	1	
(14)	-.382*	-.260*	.027	.049	.020	.018	.035	.037	.086*	.208*	.091*	-.112*	.265*	1

Note 1: * = $p < .05$ (two-tailed test)

Note 2: (1) police legitimacy, (2) confidence in the police, (3) total TV consumption, (4) national TV, (5) local TV (6) newspaper, (7) radio, (8) the Internet, (9) sex (1 = male), (10) race (1 = nonwhite), (11) Hispanic (1 = Hispanic), (12) CJ Major (1 = CJ major), (13) victimization (1 = victim), (14) negative encounter with police (1 = yes)

Table 3. OLS regression predicting confidence in the police.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
<i>Media Variables</i>				
Total TV consumption	-.030***	.009	-.006	.008
National TV	-.052	.158	.002	.134
Local TV	.290*	.143	.232†	.122
Newspaper	.177	.165	.157	.140
Radio	-.147	.142	-.017	.121
Internet	.183	.123	.146	.105
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>				
Sex (1 = male)			.952*	.379
Race (1 = nonwhite)	—	—	-4.863***	.479
Hispanic (1 = Hispanic)	—	—	-.286	.770
CJ Major (1 = CJ major)	—	—	.825*	.374
Victimization (1 = victim)			-.805*	.402
Negative encounter with police (1 = yes)	—	—	-3.937***	.474
<i>R</i> ²	.036		.316	

Note. *N* = 671. *SE* = standard error.

† *p* < .10, **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 4. Interaction terms between media measures and audience characteristics predicting confidence in the police.

	Confidence in the Police		
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	Model ΔR^2
Newspaper × Race	.901**	.293	.009
Newspaper × Hispanic	1.220*	.537	.005

Note. *N* = 670. *SE* = standard error.

† *p* < .10, **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 5. OLS regression predicting police legitimacy.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
<i>Media Variables</i>				
Total TV consumption	-.006	(.006)	.006	(.006)
National TV	.139	(.113)	.172	(.103)
Local TV	.092	(.102)	.042	(.094)
Newspaper	.141	(.118)	.132	(.108)
Radio	-.053	(.101)	.023	(.093)
Internet	.236***	(.088)	.199*	(.081)
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>				
Sex (1 = male)			.487†	(.292)
Race (1 = nonwhite)	—	—	-2.835***	(.369)
Hispanic (1 = Hispanic)	—	—	-.465	(.594)
CJ Major (1 = CJ major)	—	—	.940***	(.288)
Victimization (1 = victim)			-.175	(.310)
Negative encounter with police (1 = yes)	—	—	-1.866***	(.365)
<i>R</i> ²	.033		.203	

Note. *N* = 671. *SE* = standard error.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 6. Interaction terms between media measures and audience characteristics predicting police legitimacy.

	Police Legitimacy		
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	Model ΔR^2
National TV \times Sex	.464**	.168	.009
Newspaper \times Sex	.427*	.291	.005
Newspaper \times Hispanic	.911*	.106	.006
Internet \times Negative Encounter	.423*	.188	.006
Internet \times Victimization	.374*	.160	.007

Note: *N* = 671. *SE* = standard error.

The coefficients are derived from the fully specified models examined in Model 2 of Table 5

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

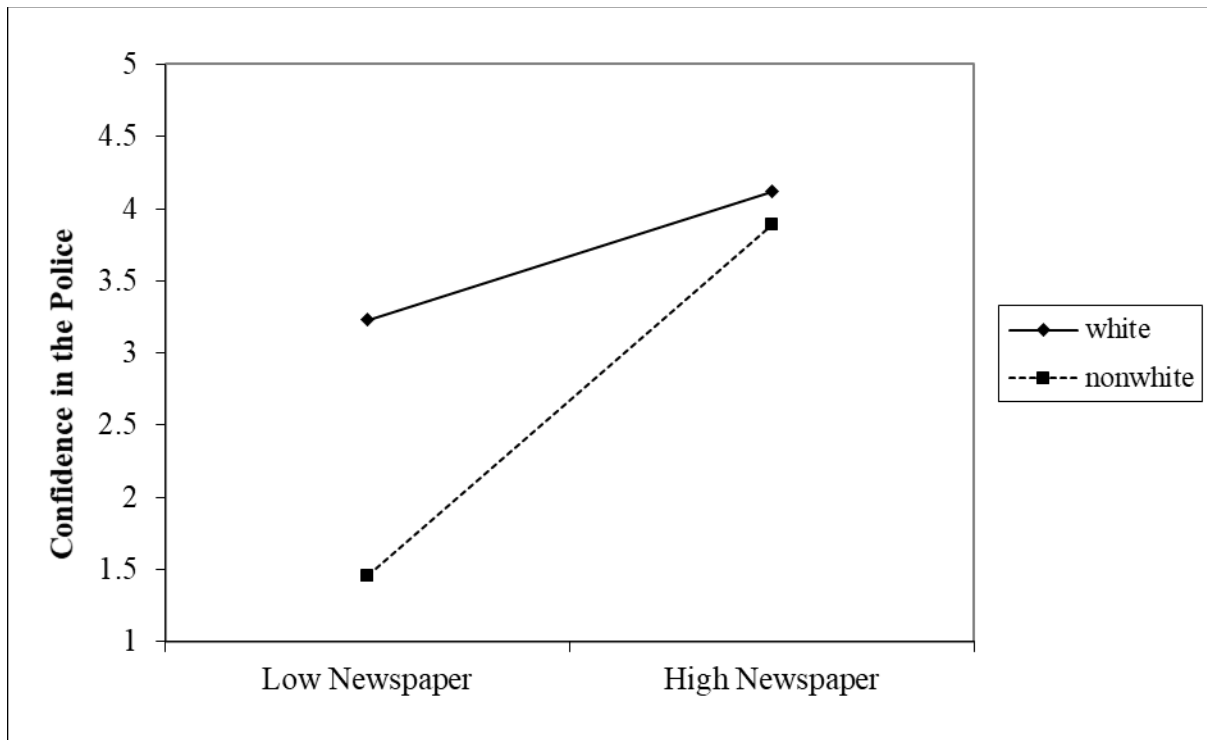


Figure 1. Interaction plot (Newspaper \times Race) for confidence in the police model

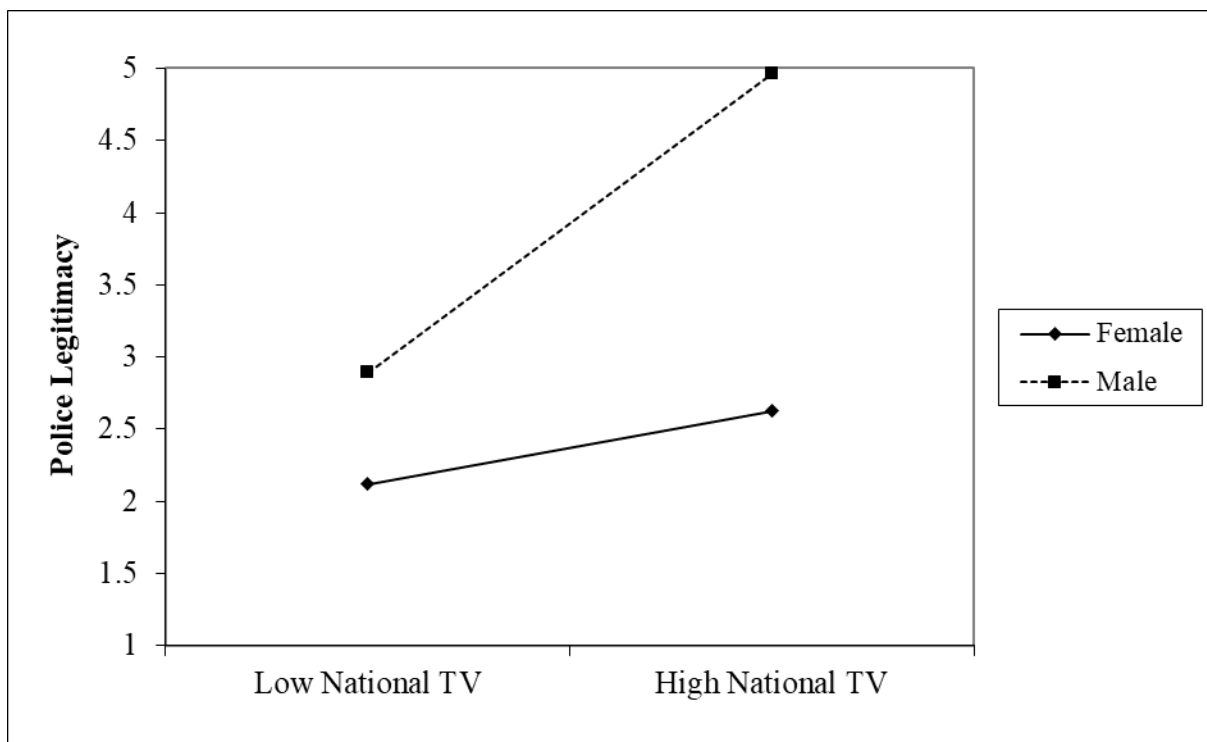


Figure 2. Interaction plot (National TV \times Sex) for police legitimacy model